

Erik Talkin: A Children's Author and An Activist Against Hunger

Why does Talkin choose the two seemingly unrelated identities and what does he really want to do?



Erik Talkin is the Chief Executive Officer of Santa Barbara Food Bank, a non-profit organization distributing over 14 million pounds of food every year to people in Santa Barbara County.

One day in 2008, [Erik Talkin](#), the new CEO of [Santa Barbara Food Bank](#), was checking one of the organization's food distributions. He saw a guy surreptitiously slip a bag stuffed full of fresh vegetables into a big dumpster. Talkin couldn't believe it and opened another dumpster, and found half a dozen identical bags in it. He was baffled. Why are these working poor who need healthy food throwing away good stuff but holding cans of beans with added salt and peaches in heavy syrup?

Mr. Talkin has tried to find the answer for years to better understand the situations and difficulties that people in hunger face. The most profound answer he discovered is food illiteracy, which became his lifelong career goal since that day. He found that just giving people more food does not end hunger- although that is what food banks around the world have done for decades. Many working poor people lack food literacy to manage their food budget, shop wisely, and cook healthy food with the limited resources they have. Hence, the big bags of vegetables are useless for them, the people who know little about cooking

nutritious food. Many kids don't have the opportunity to learn food literacy as their parents are always working outside at dinner time. As a result, their health conditions can suffer and they need to spend money on buying medicine, which further cuts their food budget and makes them fall into a vicious circle.

Food insecurity has been a severe and significant problem in Santa Barbara. Although people often think that Santa Barbara County is a wealthy county and there shouldn't be any hungry people, the reality is that out of 58 California counties, only 14 are more food insecure than Santa Barbara County. So many working families in Santa Barbara struggle to make enough money to pay for all things they need to get by, such as heat, light, electricity and rent. Thus, good healthy food can be the only thing that is possible to cut from their family budgets. In this case, the food and skills to cook nutritious dishes that Talkin and his team serve matters a lot to the lives of people in hunger here.

From Saving Homeless People to Hungry People

Erik Talkin was born in New England and his father was a submariner, but also a good cook. Thus, Erik always had a great interest in food and attained food literacy at a very young age. From 2002 to 2008, he worked at the Community Kitchen of Santa Barbara when he was helping a homeless person named Ruth. She had a very unhealthy look, and her skin was almost gray. But once she began to eat a lot of healthy vegetables, her face changed and her skin reverted to its normal color. Meanwhile, her mood and everything were far better. This made Talkin realize food can play an amazing part in a person's ability to not only be healthy but also be able to interact with everyone and be a part of the community.

As he saw a lot of similar cases where families benefited from a healthy diet, Talkin decided to work on issues of nutrition on a broader scale than just one program with homeless people. Thus, he came to Santa Barbara Food Bank and wanted to work with more people to build their food literacy, their ability to look after their own health with food. In many ways, that's what Talkin had always wanted to do.

Educational Programs for Kids' Food Literacy

At Santa Barbara Food Bank, Talkin developed several programs to get kids in hunger connected with food, help them learn through eating and cooking by themselves—"so it doesn't become a theoretical thing," said Talkin—and tell them what a healthy diet is.

"I want to focus on kids because they are very young and are going to be here longer, so they can always affect a long-term change. They always get opportunities and time to pass on the food literacy knowledge to more people and help a broader scale of change in our community." Talkin said.

To help small kids, Talkin led the food bank to hold a program called “[Food Literacy in Preschool \(FLIP\)](#).” In this program, volunteers go into preschools, pass out a certain fruit or vegetable, sing songs about it with children, and make a simple recipe that kids can bring home to foster a nutritious diet in their family. Another program is called “[Kid’s Farmers Market](#),” which allows kids to get fresh fruits and vegetables, and they also get cooking lessons from volunteers that the food bank trained. The kids will thus know how to take those vegetables that they may not like or don’t normally eat and turn them into dishes they want to eat, which builds their food literacy.

One boy in this program has impressed Talkin a lot. “At the end of the course, he said his family ate more vegetables now as a result of him, because he brought home vegetables and also had cooking knowledge to make healthy dishes,” Talkin said. “So even though the boy was very young, he was able to make a positive change in the health of his family.”

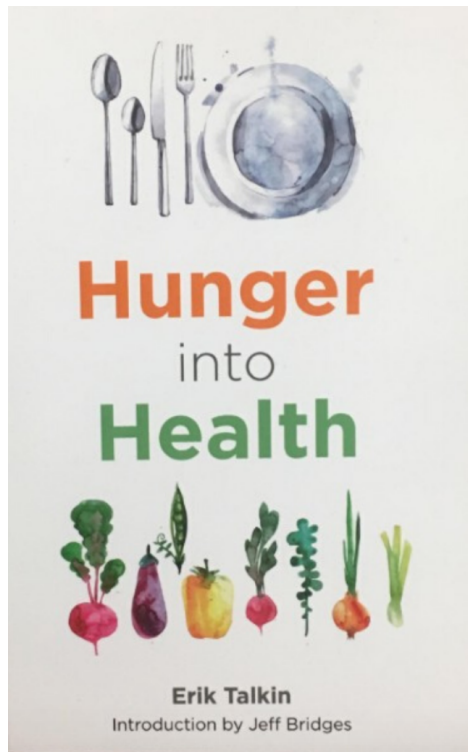
Given kids’ power, Talkin’s daughter, Mia, was influenced and empowered by her father a lot and became involved in helping the bank. She recorded [a video clip](#) about how kids can help their classmates in hunger, and she also passed the knowledge to her friends and got them interested in fighting hunger.

Talkin has also creatively developed many other programs, including [Teens Love Cooking \(TLC\)](#), [Food Creativity Lab](#) in High Schools, and even education for families and seniors to empower different groups of people suffering from food insecurity. In this way, the programs can target people in different situations and solve their food problems efficiently.

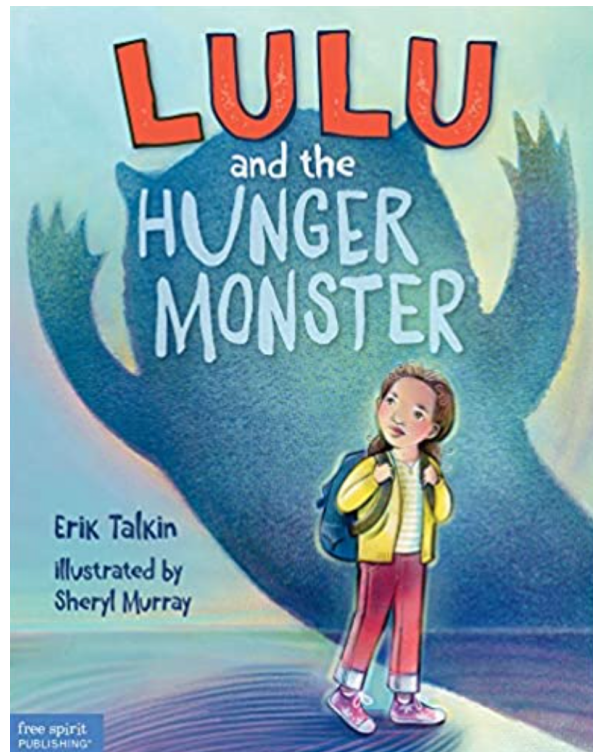
A Book Author Who Empowers Children in Hunger and Other Food Bank Activists

Besides developing innovative education programs to empower people in hunger with food literacy, Talkin has written and published two books: [Hunger Into Health](#) and [Lulu and the Hunger Monster](#). *Hunger Into Health* aims at people who are working in food banks around the world, telling them to move away from just giving people food to focus on food literacy and give people the power to look after their own health. Talkin thus empowered activists at food banks worldwide to help people in hunger more efficiently.

On the other hand, *Lulu and the Hunger Monster* focuses on children who are very vulnerable to food insecurity. Talkin had met lots of kids like Lulu, who have hard-working parents but still face up to the creature called hunger monster, and it is the creature that only they can see. Because hunger is invisible and other people can’t see it, and people are always embarrassed to talk about hunger, the hunger monster is able to “breathe” and continue. Lulu gets help in tackling it, and finally beats the monster.



The book cover of *Hunger into Health*.



The book cover of *Lulu and the Hunger Monster*.

“If I can encourage a single child not to be so worried about asking for help, or even better that kids can make sure their friends and classmates are getting enough to eat, then I have to write this book,” Talkin said.

Next year, two sequel books to Lulu are coming out to empower more children to have a healthy diet. One book is called *Fast Food Genie*, which looks at how kids deal with the challenges of junk food and how that makes them unhealthy. Another book is called *Food Desert Dragon*, which encourages kids to get involved and make a change within the local food system. Talkin wants the three books (the Lulu book series) to form a curriculum for young people to build food literacy and talk about food issues in their local communities. By writing books for different audiences, Talkin educated food bank activists to change their approach to help people efficiently and he also heavily invested in promoting food literacy in young children.

A Creative Leader Who Redefines Leadership

As the CEO of Santa Barbara Food Bank, Talkin is not only creative in developing innovative programs, but knows how to empower his staff in the organization to also be creative and motivated to fight against hunger.

When he led his team to develop the food literacy and preschool programs, Talkin thought that the programs were an opportunity for people in the community to come in and help empower people in hunger. Given that originally the food bank had paid people in teaching the educational programs, Talkin saw the opportunity to expand what his team was doing if they could train volunteers to do that. Since the training was once a week or a couple of times a month, it was not asking for lots of the volunteers' time so that many people might be available. Thus, Talkin was able to switch the focus from paid program staff to volunteer program staff, which allowed the food bank to increase the number of programs it was able to run countywide to serve a broader range of people in need.

Talkin also paid attention to helping his staff be creative and encouraging them to do things themselves. Talkin tried to empower Lacey Baldiviez, the education director at the Food Bank, by giving her opportunities to start afresh with the educational programs and asking her to think up and dream up new ways of getting food literacy messages across. With Talkin's encouragement and guidance, Baldiviez has finally developed many online courses to help people build their food literacy without in-person meetings to avoid catching COVID. She has also developed Spanish language social media education to engage lots of Spanish-speakers in the community. These new avenues, which were built on the programs that Talkin developed a few years ago, worked well to empower people with food literacy during the pandemic period, when everything had to be online.

"As a leader, you want to create opportunities for your fellows to try new things and help them to remove the roadblocks. You don't want them to think they are able to do it because you are letting them do it. It is about clearing the way so that people can find their own way and their own strength and be able to do it themselves." Talkin said.

During the pandemic, the food bank faced challenges of a doubled increase in the need for its service, but the number of volunteers was diminishing because people were worried about catching COVID by being close to other people. Talkin led his team to solve this problem as they found 50 National Guard people and some additional volunteers, and persuaded them to support the food distribution.

"Leadership is not about what a leader is doing. It is what the leader is enabling others to do and empowering them to do so. It is about encouraging people within the organization to have the confidence to think that they can do more than they are doing currently, and they are making the right decisions." Talkin shared his leadership principles of leading his team to battle the challenging pandemic period.

To ensure the volunteers were well looked after, Talkin gave them a lot of time off and also emergency pay if they were in danger of getting COVID because of work. Talkin also provided them with many other ways to help them and stop them from burning out if they worked too hard.

Focusing on Creating a Better World

Although Talkin has multiple different identities- an activist fighting against anger, a book author, and the CEO of a big non-profit organization in Santa Barbara, his career choices and experiences have always followed the same idea: encouraging and empowering people to create a better world where they eat healthy, look after each other, and feel confident to do what they need to do to express themselves and do their best work.

“I am approaching the goal in different ways, to encourage people to take power themselves,” Talkin said, who has always been helping people via different communication mediums, including books and educational programs.

No matter what approaches Talkin uses, food literacy is always the message he wants to communicate to the world.

“People shouldn’t feel embarrassed or that it’s their problem to face hunger. It is a community problem if someone doesn’t have enough to eat. We should talk about it and empower people with food literacy to help themselves be healthier. Everyone can join, and so we fight against hunger together.” Talkin said.